

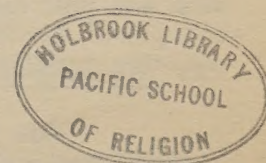
"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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RECHURCHING RURAL AMERICA

By Mark A. Dawber*

The rechurching of rural America is long overdue. In earlier years, when changes occurring in rural life were slow, there was little pressure upon the church to make adjustments. But during recent years changes in town and country have been drastic and rapid. We are now in the grip of large and powerful social forces, influencing all the world and in particular the United States, which has been more rapidly mechanized than any other nation.

It has been clear to many of us for some time that these forces have operated to bring about major changes in local community life in America. Some have had the temerity to predict these changes and to propose plans and programs whereby the church might meet them. But we have often been ignored and few have taken our concern seriously.

It is true these changes have come so rapidly that most people could be excused for not observing them, to say nothing of being able to understand them and to arrive at some conclusion regarding their meaning for the church. The fact is we are just now beginning to comprehend the nature of these vast changes and to find words to describe them. It is well for us to try to understand the nature of these developments and the relationship of the rural church to them. Certainly the rechurching of rural America can only be accomplished by an intelligent understanding of the forces and changes involved.

I. URBANIZATION

One of the major factors in the changes has been the urbanization of rural life. The mechanization of agriculture, the industrialization of rural occupations, centralization, transportation, and social organization all enter into the picture. And, of course, one of the results is secularization. For, as Robert E. Park has stated, "Urbanization and secularization go hand in hand."

The town and country church developed in an environment of simple culture but now finds itself in more complex and very different cultural surround-

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ings. In the past the major unifying social forces were confined to urban areas. Today they are stretching their influence to the last nook and cranny of rural America. The contrasts between urban and rural life are less definite today. Nearly every rural community is in some relationship with one or more urban centers. As Dr. Samuel Kincheloe has so well said, "Urban regionalism is one of the most pronounced influences in American life today, cutting across state lines leaping over vacant fields, and even supplying the words which rural people talk and sing. All the modern means of communication, especially the automobile, airplane, radio, and motion picture, are having their influence in bringing the country and the city together."

II. THE LARGER COMMUNITY

Now a word as to what is involved in this rechurcing process. First, we would say that a new and larger geographical area should be considered. Many of our rural churches are weak because they are still restricted to the original horse-and-buggy area of operation. Such an area does not usually have the population or resources to support the kind of church and ministry that will command the respect and loyalty of the people. Just as some rural schools have found it necessary to consolidate and move to a more logical center of operation, so must many churches consider the geographical readjustment necessary to provide them with a sufficient challenge and the resources to operate effectively.

There will be many situations where it will not be feasible to close out neighborhood churches. In these cases the next best thing could be done, namely, the inauguration of a larger parish or a cooperative ministry in the wider area which has become the new community.

III. A MORE INCLUSIVE PROGRAM

The next suggestion is that the adequate rechurcing of rural America does not mean simply the erection of new church buildings in the larger geographical communities. This may be involved in some places. But we have in mind also the program of the church.

In all too many instances the rural churches in the past were not concerned, or were unable because of lack of resources, to operate a comprehensive program of religious education, social and recreational life, and to take note of civic and community interests in a way that is now necessary if all of life is to be made Christian. Unless methods and means can be found to enable the town and country church to penetrate the educational and social activities of the community in a larger and more aggressive service, then secular institutions will take over and the secularization process will become more intrenched. The rechurcing of rural America is necessary if this increased impact upon secular and community life is to take place.

IV. LEADERSHIP

Another factor in the rechurcing of rural America is leadership. Many ministers have done a valiant and superb job under very difficult conditions. But these greater communities with their enlarged populations and increasing activities will call for an enlarged ministerial leadership. At least two persons, probably three, will be needed, giving full time, for such a program as is here proposed. We envision a minister in general charge and responsible for preaching, a religious education director who will have charge of education and social activities, and a pastor and personal counselor. This, to me, is the minimum of

leadership to be contemplated for the kind of church that adequate rechurcing should demand.

I recognize that in many communities some of this leadership would in all probability have to be lay and volunteer. But I would ask this question: If a city church serving a similar population and church membership finds it necessary to have the type of professional leadership suggested, why not the town and country church which has moved over into the larger area of need and service?

We have said nothing about the quality of the leadership that is here suggested. We are assuming that if such a program is put into effect the qualitative element in leadership will follow. Perhaps this is taking too much for granted. In case this is true let a word be spoken now.

A casual study of the comprehensive program will convince many that much of our rural leadership has not received the training necessary to do the job. The educational, sociological, moral, and spiritual implications of the present day demand a thoroughly trained and dedicated leadership. One hopeful sign toward meeting this need is that our theological seminaries are waking up to these new and larger demands in the training of the ministry. Some have already established strong departments of town and country church training and are fully aware of the need for better prepared rural ministers.

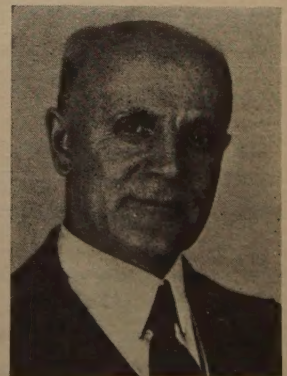
V. COOPERATION AND UNITY

There is another factor involved in the rechurcing of rural America. It is interdenominational cooperation. In many areas problems can best be solved by cooperation within the denomination. It is regrettable if individuals in a denomination stand in the way of satisfactory rechurcing. Where denominations are competing with themselves and a consolidation or relocation of some churches within the denomination is all that would be necessary, that must be faced. In other rural areas we might need to consider the uniting of churches of different denominations to achieve the end desired.

I am fully aware of the difficulty of what is proposed. I know some things are not going to be done just because they are the right and logical things to do. But I believe that there are rural areas where the spirit and purpose are ripe to accomplish this interdenominational program. In some communities local churches themselves may obstruct progress. However, a new and more truly Christian leadership is arising which is becoming conscious of the iniquity of the present situation. They are finding ways and means to consolidate forces in order to cope with the evils of our modern life on the one hand and to meet the crying needs for better program and leadership.

In closing, we would reiterate that the rechurcing of rural America is a must if the things we profess as Christians are to be achieved. Time is running out and we need to be alerted to this task.

Calvin Coolidge was not a liberal by any means but he was forthright and honest in his thinking. When, as President of the United States, he was invited to speak at the Annual Convocation of Congregational Churches of New England, he said, "Institutions that fail to adjust themselves to meet the changing needs of the present and the future, decay and perish."



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This is equally true for the church as for other institutions. It is particularly true in the case of the rural church. The danger now as always is to conceive of our organizations, institutions, and systems as ends in themselves. They seem to become more important than the goals they were organized to achieve. This is a peril that confronts the church. Systems become intrenched if not petrified. To break down these systems and reconstruct them so as to serve better the purposes for which they were intended and to meet the new and enlarging needs of people is one of the imperative demands now upon church leaders.

The rechurcing of rural America will require the reconsideration and revamping of our denominational systems. The words of Bishop Brent should shock us into humility and reality, "The world is too strong for a divided church."

The words of one of our famous poets also express a truth that is exceedingly significant as we think of this rechurcing task:

"Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be;
They are but broken lights of Thee,
And Thou, O Lord, art more than they."

Our denominations must end their divisiveness on pain of losing their hold on the community, nay, on pain of losing their hold on Christ. God give us grace, intelligence, conviction, and spiritual power that is now necessary to move out toward new horizons of need. The rechurcing of rural America is not the only means whereby this may be done. But it is one of the first and important steps necessary to accomplish the moral and spiritual ends of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

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